

# Will the Doukhobour Mothers Slay Their Children?

Threat of Peter Verigin, Leader of Religious Sect from Russia

Now Established in Canada, Suggests Inconceivable

Idea, Though His Followers Obey Him

Implicitly in All Things—Why Mother Love

Would Offset Fanaticism

It is natural that much interest and curiosity should be manifested as a result of the scanty report which came out of Canada recently that the leader of the Doukhobours has suggested a plan to register protest against what the sect regards as exorbitant taxation of their persons and properties by the Canadian Government.

The suggested plan is that all the children of the sect under the age of 19 and all the aged and infirm be drowned in the rivers of Manitoba.

And this leader—Peter Verigin by name—is all powerful in the tribe. He has never been disobeyed. He has given warning to the Canadian Government that unless some relief were effected to relieve the pressure of taxation it would be necessary for all those except the self-supporting and able bodied to be destroyed; and there is no reason to doubt that the promise is no mere threat made as a bluff or for sensational motives.

The Doukhobours are a Russian religious sect, accounted by some fanatical, which, after being persecuted for almost two centuries in Russia, sought refuge in Canada and settled in Manitoba. There was considerable trouble when the whole 9,000 of them refused to recognize the King of England.

They are a serious, worshipful lot. Their leader can do no wrong. It is believed in some quarters—even official quarters—that the children and the aged would certainly be slain if Verigin should give the word. And if he should say to the mothers of the sect: "Go, drown your children in the rivers," no Government, no soldiers, no ulterior or personal force could prevent.

**Mother Love Might Save.**

For Instinct Is Strongest

But there is perhaps some unseen power that would save the lives of the Doukhobour babies. That saving power would be mother love. It is not conceivable that the mothers of children could have at any time in the ages marched in solemn, purposeful columns down to the banks of the streams that rush through their domains in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and British Columbia, leading their children or carrying them in arms, to push them down into the swift current. Nor is it conceivable that the Doukhobour mothers would calmly heed the command of Verigin were he to give it.

But they might; even the inconceivable sometimes comes to pass.

Religion is a powerful impetus; religious fanaticism—if it be fanaticism—is a hurrying impulse that is not fleeting. They call themselves descendants of Abraham—

and did not Abraham take Isaac out to sacrifice him on the mountain top? And would he not have offered the body of Isaac up as a sacrifice had not the voice from the burning bush deterred him? Theology holds that none but the hand of God could have deterred Abraham.

Peter Verigin, known affectionately to his brothers of the Doukhobours as "Petushka," is the breath and voice and embodiment of the Omnipotent to them. He must be obeyed. It would be to them as the very voice of God were he to command that the puerile and the infirm be killed, so that the strong might start out on their journeying unincumbered, to preach to the world the coming of "The Day of Judgment."

That is what they plan to do in case it is found "expedient" to destroy the burdensome young and the feeble aged. They believe firmly that the Day of Judgment is in the offing. It is not far away, they say, and they want to warn the world that it may assemble itself and prepare for the great purging.

That is their justification for the suggestion that the children and the infirm be put to death—that it is their call to go out and preach dire warnings to the world.

**Abraham's Case Different**

**Because He Was a Man**

But would the mothers kill their offspring? Could they? Many things that border upon the impossible are conceivable, but is such a circumstance? Scarcely. It is as inconceivable as is a mother's love. None can comprehend the love of a mother for her child. It is greater than her love for herself.

Even Verigin himself, it appears, is not as certain that the mothers would obey his orders as he has been always in the past. He has said to outsiders that his command, if issued, would be for "obedience in principle only"—that he would ask the mothers to slay their children "theoretically."

Perhaps this is what he means. But there are some who believe he may issue the dread order in all seriousness.

Abraham undoubtedly would have commended the sacrifice of Isaac, his son, if the voice had not come from the burning bush and the lamb appeared. But Abraham

was a man. A mother could not and would not have gone so far as Abraham went. It cannot be accounted possible that the mother of Isaac would have sacrificed her son, even at the cost of her own salvation.

No, "Petushka" has never been disobeyed. His word is the additional commandment. He believes firmly that he would be obeyed should he give this order that the children and aged be done away with and that the long journeying be begun to forewarn of the Day of Reckoning.

But if he gives the order there is the strong possibility that he would be disobeyed. Mothers are strong in the love of their children and weak in their cleaving to doctrine or creed or command which would take their little ones from them. Records of all times in the kept memories of mankind and the legends prove that no love is so fine, so deep, so great, so enduring, as the love of a mother for her child.

The report of the suggested plan of "Petushka" has not been taken seriously by a great many who have had their curiosity excited by it. And yet the report is true. And on the word of one who has lived with the Doukhobours, "there is not much doubt that anything Verigin wants his followers to do they will do, even if it should be the slaying of their own children or self-destruction of the entire sect."

**What Doukhobour Means:**

**Literally 'Spirit Fighter'**

The word "Doukhobour" means "spirit fighter"—"warrior for the Holy Ghost." The sect first appeared in Russia some two hundred years ago. To be more exact the sect first was known in the year 1753. It was formed by a Russian who had been under the influence of a foreigner of obscure origin—said to have been a Quaker—who had escaped from Siberia and lived secretly in the domain of the Government of Kharkoff.

The tenets of the faith even now bear a faint trace of kinship to the Quaker religion, but the present day Doukhobours regard the Quakers as neither better nor worse than others who assent to an outside creed.

They regard themselves as God's people, as the chosen people. They trace their origin through David, King of Israel, back to Abel, son of Adam, who was killed by his brother Cain, according to the Scriptures.

The truest among the Doukhobours is the leader. He inherits his leadership from his parents. He is the "son of God." He is the "living God" himself. Whatever the leader says is "the word of God." What he does is "the act of God."

In spite of the fact that they trace their lineage through David and Abraham to Abel, son of Adam, and in spite of the fact that it is Scriptural, the Doukhobours do not take the Scriptures as we have them. Through the ages and through their elected isolation they have lost the Bible. No doubt they had it or a part of it at the inception of their faith. But there are few of them who can read now. They live apart to themselves, and certain fragments of what might have at one time been portions of the Scriptures live in their memories. These fragments, inclusive of many of the Psalms of David, are much distorted.

A story illustrating their ignorance of Scripture is that of Verigin's letters from Siberia to his people in the Russian wars.

**Banished to Siberia.**

**But Still Wouldn't Yield**

Back in the eighties, soon after Verigin became the accepted leader of the Doukhobours, he began to preach the abolition of private property. That was during the period of the sect's greatest prosperity in Russia, and when some of the capitalists among his followers called the attention of Czar Nicholas to the preachments of Verigin the monarch was only too glad to interfere, and the result was that Verigin was banished to Siberia.

But Verigin would not yield; his powerful will, his inordinate ambition to rule only chafed and increased in his confinement. It was from Siberia that he urged his followers to carry on, despite the persecutions at the hands of the Government.

He wrote them letters—for he can read and write. While in Siberia he was accustomed to copy the Epistles of Paul and send them home to the Doukhobours as his own messages. They never detected this plagiarism because of their illiteracy and because Verigin does not allow them to read the New Testament.

During their days in Russia the Doukhobours were almost constantly persecuted. The Government and the church drove them from place to place, banished their leaders and killed many of them. It was only during the reign of Alexander I, that they were happy and prosperous. From 1801 to 1819 they lived on the fertile banks

of the River Molochnaia in Taurida, Southern Russia. Here they grew rich and prosperous. But after the accession of Czar Nicholas I, persecutions of the Doukhobours began anew with even more merciless vigor. They were forced to relinquish their lands and emigrate to the Caucasus.

The Doukhobours cherish the memory of Czar Alexander. He was the only Czar they recognized. They believe that he himself was a Doukhobour, that he died not on the throne but escaped from his court and lived the last days of his life among the members of the sect. Later, according to this legend, he was taken by the Quakers to England and then to America.

They recognize no Governments, but they do not preach against them. They only seek not to be interfered with. Their opinion of Governments they express as follows:

"It is not our affair how a merchant in a neighboring town manages his business. Let him manage as he knows how as long as he sells honestly. He is for himself and we are for ourselves. But if he begins to fool us and steal from us, to lie and, what is worse, to cause people trouble and violence, then we will turn away from him and will have nothing to do with him."

Violence is the great antipathetic quality to their creed. They do not believe in war. After Verigin was banished to Siberia Czar Nicholas forced many of his followers into the military service. Verigin's messages from Siberia urged all Doukhobours to



Above is a typical Doukhobour village in Canada with some of the endangered children. At left is Peter Verigin, sect leader, and Chertokoff, a confidant of Count Leo Tolstoi.

desert from the army and many of them did.

When the Canadian Government began to check up on its man power for employment in the world war it counted the Doukhobour men of military age available. But the Doukhobours did not so consider themselves. They protested violently and after a great deal of trouble they won on the ground of religion.

From Siberia Verigin ordered his followers to emigrate from Russia. He gave his orders in detail and every order was carried out to the letter by the Doukhobours. In obeying him they went through inconceivable hardship—floggings, imprisonments, court-martials—but the point is that they did obey. They deserted from the army as he had told them, and they assembled and prepared for the journey to the "promised land."

After leaving Russia they settled in the Island of Cyprus, where they remained for a good many years. But the climate was not favorable to them and they asked Verigin's

permission to find some new home. He sent his permission from bleak Siberia, and in the late '90s they started the exodus from Cyprus which resulted in the settlement in Canada.

Some time later Verigin joined his flock—after he had been returned from Siberia—and was allowed to leave Russia. He has enemies in his flock. They characterize him a man with an ambition like that of Alexander the Great. They say he purposefully made his followers emigrate, believing that they would be much easier to rule in a strange setting. He was probably right, for Verigin is all powerful now.

Upon arriving in Canada Verigin completely abolished private property among his followers. Everything is done for the common good. It is the ideal Communist state. But—the lands, the buildings, the furnishings, all property, is acquired in the name of Verigin and is virtually his own.

It was back in the '50s when the star of Verigin began to glow on the Dou-

"The Massacre of the Innocents," from a tapestry by Raphael of Urbino and now a treasure in the

Vatican. This work of art portrays the greatest slaughter of children in history.

Verigin did it, and "Petushka" can do no wrong.

This same piece is the only person who has ever been able to exert a great influence over Verigin.

It might be pointed out that there is no marriage ceremony—as there are no ceremonies of any sort, religious or otherwise—and the man takes a wife as he likes and lives with her, the recognition of the marital state by the members of the sect being sufficient bond.

**Even the Sabine Women Could Not Have Done It**

The Sabine women, religious fanatics as they were, would perhaps have never been able to throw their children over the high cliff even if the divine thunderbolt had not intervened. In the days of Herod, when the command went out to destroy all infant children, mothers clutched their babes to their hearts and concealed them in the most obscure and impenetrable places so that the Roman soldiers might never find them. Loyal women of the Roman Empire would rather have been killed themselves than to have had a hair of the head of any of their babes harmed. The state of mind of the Doukhobours to-day is such that would tend to make it more conceivable that they would unhesitatingly kill their own children. The war and the Russian revolution have made a tremendous impression on them. They are extremely radical—politically and morally. They believe that Czar Nicholas was punished for his persecution of their sect.

And, finally and most important, they do firmly believe that the "Day of Judgment" is rapidly approaching and they are preparing themselves for its coming. They are wrought up over many things. Some say that they are wholly crazy. Being in this state of mind, and believing that Verigin is the "living God" himself, will they refuse to obey him, whatever his orders and however horrible they may be?

The evidence says they will obey. They have always obeyed. They are lost in the grip of a strange and weird complex. They are poverty stricken and burdened by their children and their aged. They are eager to begin the journeying to preach the coming of the "Day of Reckoning."

Indeed there is no denying that the evidence points in a sinister direction. But there may be something which outweighs the reasonableness of things. Is it possible that two thousand mothers could march stolidly down to the banks of a rushing, roaring river and offer their children as sacrifices to a vague siren which is a figment of the mind of their "earthly consoler"—their "living God"?

It is scarcely conceivable.